

Status of Soviet weapons concerns CIA director

By Bill Gertz
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A Soviet review of measures used to guard Red Army atomic weapons has raised concerns at the CIA that the Kremlin leadership may not have total control over its nuclear arsenal, CIA Director William Webster said yesterday.

"We've seen signs that they are not as sure as they were before, and that lowers the level of our confidence," he said.

"They are looking at what they need to do to be sure that missiles do not fall into unfriendly hands, that they are moved if necessary, that the systems they have in place to prevent someone engaging in an unauthorized fire are protected," Mr. Webster said.

The CIA director met with reporters for a farewell breakfast at the agency's Langley headquarters. He announced his retirement earlier this month.

Mr. Webster's remarks were made against the backdrop of alarming statements by a hard-line Soviet military official. Col. Viktor Alksnis — dubbed the "Black Colonel" — recently warned that civil war in the Soviet Union would involve the use of nuclear weapons.

"If civil war here is unavoidable, it will involve nuclear arms and weapons of mass destruction," Col. Alksnis told Britain's New Statesman on April 5. "Yes, we shall perish, but we shall take the whole world to the grave. You will perish with us. There will be no borders. The conflict will splash over them, first into neighboring countries, then into a world catastrophe."

Bush administration officials said the Soviets in recent months have moved nuclear arms out of Eastern Europe, the Baltic states and some Central Asian republics for security reasons.

The arms are being consolidated at other sites in the Russian republic, where additional security personnel and protective fences have been spotted, said officials who declined to be named.

Also, the Soviets plan to move SS-18 nuclear missiles from a base in Kazakhstan, which has been torn by ethnic violence, to an area inside the Russian republic, one official said.

In February 1990, Soviet troops

were called in to protect a nuclear weapons storage facility near Baku, Azerbaijan, that was overrun by armed rebels, according to U.S. officials.

As a result of the incident, the Soviets moved some nuclear arms from unstable areas in the Central Asian republics and the Baltic states to more secure regions, the officials said.

The CIA chief's remarks reflect an increased concern about the security of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. In an interview last year he said the Soviet command structure had exercised "a pretty tight Moscow-to-site control system" over the arms.

Mr. Webster said yesterday, "We see them paying more attention to this in ways that would suggest that they are not as competent as they have been in the past."

But the security of Soviet nuclear weapons does not pose an immediate threat, he said. It is a "longer-term" concern that will require close monitoring by U.S. intelligence agencies.

On Mr. Gorbachev's future, Mr. Webster said the Soviet leader has made profound changes in the Soviet system but "he's unleashed a set of forces that went beyond his own vision."

"The question remains: Is it too late for Gorbachev?" he asked.

"Moses didn't get to the Promised Land, and that may be the case with Gorbachev," said Mr. Webster, echoing Defense Secretary Dick Cheney's hard-line view of the Soviet leader's future.

Mr. Gorbachev is being eclipsed by reformers such as Russian parliament chief Boris Yeltsin and other

leaders of Soviet republics, he said.

Several republics, including Georgia and the Baltic states, believe they are outside the Soviet Union and Moscow may try to "pull the last remaining economic strings" in seeking to regain control.

"But I don't think that will do anything to slow down those that are heading for the exits," Mr. Webster said.

Asked if the Soviet Union would break apart in the coming years, Mr. Webster said, "It could even be in a different shape by the end of the year."

On other issues, Mr. Webster said:

- The CIA's Counter-Narcotics Center has detected an increase in illicit drug production around the world, and some countries, notably Colombia, have shown "an erosion of will" in battling international drug traffickers.

- The investigation into the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, has produced "more than a circumstantial case" against the perpetrators, including several state sponsors of terrorism.

- Saddam Hussein is "currently very much in charge" of Iraq, but the allied coalition will continue to exercise "significant leverage" over him as long as two major oil export pipelines remain closed.

- The CIA views nuclear, chemical, biological and missile proliferation as "an increasing concern."

"I'm glad to see it put in the public diplomacy area," Mr. Webster said, referring to President Bush's initiative to curb weapons proliferation in the Middle East.

The Washington Post _____
The New York Times _____
The Washington Times A3 _____
The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
The Chicago Tribune _____

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CIA Director William Webster
